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Recognising strategy and tactics in constructing and working with involuntary social work clients

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Abstract

This paper reports on the author's academic work on working with involuntary clients, which began with a knowledge exchange project in Scotland. I reflect back on this work and use it as a way in to explore subsequent reflections on the field. These move beyond consideration of the skills required to undertake such work through locating the category of involuntary clients within wider, yet contradictory, governmental discourses on client engagement. These are identified as the strategy which sets the context for such work. But strategy is enacted through the day-to-day tactics of social workers on the ground; such tactics, enacted in everyday encounters, are constitutive of effective but also ineffective engagement with clients. Discussion goes on to problematise the distinction between voluntary and involuntary clients and to suggest that effective social work practice, whatever the nature of that involvement, requires that clients are recognised at an ethical and relational level.

Implications

- The term involuntary client(s) cannot be taken for granted but is constructed and needs to be understood in particular and often contradictory policy and professional contexts.
- Effective but also ineffective ways of working with involuntary clients go beyond the acquisition or demonstration of particular skills but are embodied in the everyday relational practices of social workers.

- Ethical engagement with involuntary clients proceeds from a sense of mutual recognition.

Keywords: Involuntary clients; engagement; user involvement; strategy; tactics; everyday; recognition

Introduction

This article offers a retrospective on the author's academic work with involuntary clients in Scotland. In so doing, it picks up on previous empirical work through a knowledge exchange project reported on at the time (Smith et al, 2011; Smith et al, 2013; Wilkinson et al, 2012). Although the original study and the policy context reflected upon is set in Scotland, similar trends to those discussed are evident across the Anglophone world. In a context where literature on working with involuntary clients is remarkably sparse (Rooney and Mirick, 2018), the article seeks to extend our understandings of such work beyond consideration of the skills required to do so, to set such work in wider political and policy context.

In the period between completing the knowledge exchange project in 2012 and writing this article, I was asked to give the inaugural lecture for a local children and families' charity. The charity's roots were in the Family Service Units (FSU), a pioneering, pacifist organisation that emerged across the UK in response to the social problems that beset communities during World War Two. Giving the lecture required that I delve into the organisation's history. The FSU's approach was, explicitly, a voluntary one:

The offer of help comes from the Unit to the family. Nor has the worker any official powers or authority and the family can at any time ask them to withdraw. It is therefore imperative to gain the whole-hearted co-operation of the family and the approach is thus necessarily one of friendship. Friendship is, in fact, the foundation of the work of the Units, a friendship without condescension or aloofness, neither forced nor superficial" (Jones, 1950, p. 174).

An outcome of engagement framed as an offer of help was that the organisation claimed rarely to encounter overt hostility from clients (Starkey, 2002).

Reflection on the approach taken by FSU might suggest that social work practice, offered voluntarily, from a position of friendship and holding out the prospect of practical help, offers little room for resistance. This observation might then prompt the question of just what kind of thing the involuntary client is? The category is not what the philosopher Ian Hacking (1991) might term a natural kind; rather, it is one that has been constructed in particular political and professional contexts which, through the identification of risk and a concomitant rush to protection and surveillance (Stanford, 2008, 2012) act to create the involuntary client. The label, in turn, operates discursively, constructing both the relationship and attendant identities of those party to it (McDonald, 2006). Thus, the employment of the term “involuntary” is itself likely to determine the respective responses of client and worker.

The rest of the article seeks to problematise the construction of the involuntary client in social work and to position it within shifting political and professional ideologies. Drawing on the work of the French philosopher, Michel De Certeau (1984), I distinguish between strategies for working with involuntary clients, located within contradictory governmental discourses, which set the terms for engagement and tactics, which I identify as the ground-level practices of social workers. Practitioner tactics operate against a backdrop of governmental strategy but can also find spaces to either reinforce or mitigate these strategies in respect of how social workers actually engage with clients. Introducing Axel Honneth’s work, I suggest that a notion of mutual recognition between social worker and client is implicit in and central to effective engagement.

Background

As noted, the literature on working with involuntary clients is sparse (Rooney and Mirick, 2018), especially so given that, across most of the Western World, state sanctioned social work practice is undertaken, increasingly, with clients who might be identified as involuntary. Trotter and Ward identify involuntary clients as those:

... who receive social or legal services not through their choice but because of a legal directive or the potential threat of legal action. For example, offenders on parole or probation, families in the child protection system, patients subject to mental health orders or young people who fail to attend school (2013, p. 75)

Rooney further differentiates involuntary clients into the categories Mandated Clients, and Nonvoluntary Clients. “Mandated Clients must work with a practitioner because of a legal mandate or court order ... and a Nonvoluntary Client has contact with helping professionals through pressure from agencies, referral sources, other persons, family members, and outside events” (Rooney, 1992, p.6).

Definitions in a child protection context have expanded to include a notion of the resistant client, conceptualised as:

any form of non-cooperation from parents, including apparent cooperation that masks issues of concern, not engaging, violent or threatening behaviour and other manifestations of non-engagement. Resistance is considered a more appropriate term than non-cooperation as it captures the active nature of such behaviour. Resistance can therefore be seen as the antithesis of client engagement; the two are effectively different sides of the same coin (Forrester et al, 2012, p.118).

Matters are further complicated by the fact that clients may be involuntary in the sense that they are mandated but not necessarily resistant. Youth placed in secure accommodation, for instance, are mandated but may also be relieved to be there. Any binary distinction between voluntarism and involuntarism with respect to subsequent engagement or non-engagement is therefore problematic; different shades of voluntarism and involuntarism acquire meaning in complex and dynamic social relations and practices. Notions of compliance are similarly fluid, existing along an axis of compliance for purely technical or legal reasons to a more internalised “substantive” compliance (Robinson and McNeill, 2008). The same authors claim that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is central to the nature of compliance achieved. Pösö et al, (2018), likewise, suggest that the skills of a social worker to recognise resistance and to work with it may lead to transformation of the original involuntarism into voluntarism (or vice versa).

Echoing McDonald’s (2006) point above, around how terminology can operate discursively in constructing relationships and identities, the term “involuntary” can evoke strong and largely negative reactions from practitioners, being associated with terms such as “difficult”, “uncooperative”, “in denial”, and “hostile” (De Jong and Berg, 2001). The category can also hold particular meaning for clients who often do not believe that they need help but that their

predicaments are a result of system failures. They frequently view social work contact as “unwanted intrusions into their lives and the remedies recommended to them as meaningless or harmful” (De Jong and Berg, 2001, p. 361/2). They may not be wrong – there is evidence that bad social work intervention is indeed harmful (e.g. Lonne et al, 2008; Featherstone *et al*, 2014; Trotter, 2015) and is certainly experienced as such (Smithson and Gibson, 2015).

To date, what little academic work that has been done around involuntary clients has mostly been at the level of attempting to identify the type of skills required for operational engagement in the everyday “doing” of social work. Achieving such engagement is essential to being able to work with the client at all. Trotter’s (1999) text, for example, is primarily and very helpfully concerned with helping social workers to identify how to be effective at this level.

More recent policy directions across the Anglophone World, however, introduce a layer of engagement above this, which seeks to involve those who use public services in their planning and delivery (Bovaird, 2007; Boyle and Harris, 2009; Pestoff et al, 2011). Such “participative engagement” is often referred to as “service user involvement” or “user participation”. Translated to social work, this demand to involve clients in work undertaken with them sets up a tension in respect of involuntary clients, whose views may well be that they would prefer not to have social workers in their lives at all. In practice, it is likely that both forms of engagement will intertwine. Effective face-to-face engagement is a necessary precursor to participative engagement - asking involuntary clients what they want from social work is unlikely to be effective unless good working relationships are in place. Likewise, a degree of participative engagement in which client views are given due regard, is likely to be essential for effective operational engagement.

Forrester and his colleagues (2008a; 2008b; 2012) advocate the use of motivational interviewing (MI) techniques to help social workers engage respectfully and effectively with families in the child protection system. Hernandez *et al*. (2010) suggest that everyday participation can be achieved with “seldom heard” social work clients - those with communication impairments, homeless young people with drug addiction problems, and black and minority ethnic young people but requires sensitivity to clients’ circumstances within an overall climate of them feeling valued.

More recent writing indicates an ethical turn in work with involuntary clients. Trotter and Ward (2013), focussing on the ethical complexities of pro-social modelling, recognise the inadequacy of professional codes to capture the complexities of such work. Whittaker and Williams (2018) recognise that effective and ethical work with involuntary clients involves a central value component which is often missing in compliance-based practice cultures, while Higgins (2015) suggests that contemporary child and family social work is dominated by an “automatic” thinking that tends not to “hear” the voices of actual human beings and that a refocusing on ethics work is needed to reinsert humane practice to the profession (Smithson and Gibson, 2015). Turney (2012) introduces a form of relationship-based practice based around Axel Honneth’s (1995) idea of recognition, which would seem to offer a suggestive analytic frame to understand guiding concepts that ought to inform work with any, but perhaps especially, involuntary clients. I return to Honneth later in the article.

A problem for social work in working with involuntary clients

While controlling and coercive elements have always been evident across social work history, Chui and Ho (2006) note that, rhetorically at least, professional social work interventions, have traditionally been developed for voluntary clients. Rooney and Mirick (2018) discuss the difficulties that face practitioners who come into the profession wishing to work with clients on a voluntary basis but are then confronted with demands to work in more controlling ways with resistant clients. This tension between a professional values system based around self-determination and the demands of compliance can be seen as disingenuous and can alienate involuntary clients (Williams and Whittaker, 2018). The upshot is that social workers are caught between two potentially contradictory imperatives – to engage clients but to do so from a starting point that regards them as problematic with resultant unequal power and resistance and a lack of the kind of ethical symmetry required to create space for clients’ views not just to be heard but to be given equal status (Lynch, 2014).

The knowledge exchange project

My interest in the idea of involuntary clients has its origins in the Scottish policy context. In 2004, the then Scottish Executive launched what it called a 21st Century Social Work Review. The Review report, *Changing Lives* (Scottish Executive, 2006) set out to survey the

profession, claiming to address perceived shortcomings in statutory social work services (Clark and Smith, 2012).

Changing Lives placed an ill-defined notion of personalisation at its heart. Its language reveals a construction of those who use social work services as consumers on a par with those who might access other professional services, with the kind of power and rights that this entails. It states that, “As demanding consumers of goods and services, users of social work services will increasingly expect the same variety, choice and flexibility that they expect from the business sector” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 20). This is a portrayal devoid of conflict or of any analysis of the complex role that social work plays in society. It is, moreover, a partial and dishonest representation of this role, which fails to acknowledge the significant proportions of those who receive services not as consumers but because they are involuntarily caught up in the system (Gallagher et al., 2010).

A few years after publication of the *Changing Lives* Report, a call was put out by an amalgam of Research Councils encouraging HEIs and Scottish local authorities to work together on knowledge exchange projects around a pressing policy or practice issue. With former colleagues at my previous university, we brought together senior officers from the six surrounding local authorities. Reflecting local concerns in social work practice, which highlighted the difficulties faced in working with involuntary clients, we co-constructed a research proposal around how social workers did and might better work in such contexts. Our activities reflected the focus of the funding call and involved dialogic knowledge exchange rather than more traditional academic research. To this end, the eight-month project involved: a review of relevant literature; knowledge sharing seminars, bringing together academics, front-line social work staff and managers from six local authorities around a theme of what works in engaging with involuntary clients; support for six small-scale practitioner research projects (PRPs) and the production of a Good Practice Guide summarising the project findings in an accessible booklet format for practitioners (pdf: [HYPERLINK "http://bit.ly/iDqiIW"](http://bit.ly/iDqiIW)).

The details of the project were reported on contemporaneously (Gallagher et al, 2011; Gallagher et al, 2011; Smith et al, 2012; Smith et al, 2013). The discussion that follows summarises the literature reviews on the different and often contradictory discourses driving the engagement agenda in social work. It then picks up on some of the findings from the

practitioner research projects. In reality, the disparate nature of the projects entailed that substantive qualitative data really only emerged from two of them, one study of child protection (Wosu and Stewart, 2011) being particularly thorough. I use some of this data to illustrate arguments about recognition (Honneth, 1996) (or its obverse, misrecognition or disrespect (Honneth, 2014) within the social work relationship with involuntary clients.

Strategy and tactics

In one of the publications following completion of the knowledge exchange project (author et al, 2012), we drew on the work of the French philosopher, Michel De Certeau (1984) to distinguish between strategy and tactics in everyday life. Strategy, De Certeau identifies as the domain of the state. Tactics, on the other hand, take advantage of opportunities and “the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the state’s disciplining apparatus” (De Certeau, 1984, p.37). In this article, I identify the wider governmental discourse around client participation in the design and delivery of social work services as strategy and the actual “doing” of social work as tactics, which are dependent on the nature of the everyday practices and interactions between social workers and their clients. De Certeau speaks of the resistance of the everyday to the conformity of strategic direction. His idea of resistance does not necessarily require active opposition but involves discretionary and situated practices to fit with prevailing situations and needs. I go on to use this distinction between strategy and tactics to tease out the different layers and determinants of social work involvement with involuntary clients. Firstly, I turn to the abstract and ill-defined meta-narrative of service user involvement.

Strategies of user involvement

In Scotland, the push towards client engagement in public services was given weight by the findings of the Christie Commission into the future of public services. Christie (2011) called for a radical reappraisal of the workings of public services with the aim to empower individuals and communities by involving them in the design and delivery of those services.

While such policy direction is presented to be self-evidently “a good thing” for social work (Scottish Executive, 2006), the reality of what it might actually mean is deeply political and is bound up with changing and contested understandings of the role of the social worker (see Asquith et al, 2006). Indeed, the lack of clarity in political definitions of user engagement

might be argued to be deliberate; it allows policy-makers to shift responsibility for difficult policy issues onto the workforce, “who are required to interpret the deliberately vague and platitudinous statements of management in order to implement the policy”. (Loughlin, 2002, p.232). It also, arguably, allows austerity measures to be dressed up as public sector improvement.

Some of the difficulties apparent in the user engagement agenda are a consequence of its often-contradictory drivers. In the current policy context, different discourses that are not necessarily compatible may overlap. Our literature review identified several strands that might be distinguished as:

- Rights-based discourses with their origins in service-user movements (e.g. disabled people, mental health service users) (Beresford and Croft, 2001).
- Neoliberal discourses, which seek to construct user engagement as a way of ensuring that individuals feel listened to and are, as a result, more amenable to government policies. Simmons and Birchall note, “it has been argued that participatory initiatives play a role in legitimizing a public sector in which trust in government is low” (2005, p. 262).
- Managerialist discourses, which construct user engagement as a means of modernising and improving services, making them more effective and efficient at performing their allotted function.
- Consumerist discourses, which construct social work users as consumers or customers of services within a capitalist market (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2006).

The context and implications for contemporary social work

The contradictory drivers behind engagement agendas render the social work task complex enough. However, complexity is compounded by the requirement to effect engagement in a political context that simultaneously demands client compliance. The political backdrop to this is that of neo- or advanced liberalism (Rose and Miller, 1992), a central feature of which is a notion of risk. This is increasingly equated with danger within which (in a child protection context) the central focus of practice has become the assessment and management of risk, undertaken not through face-to-face relationship but at a remove, by means of a range of monitoring tools (Parton, 1999). Stanford (2009) suggests that the rhetoric of risk is used

to mobilise fear to advance values of safety and security. She goes on to note the ramifications for social work: “risk, driven by the politics of fear, has re-oriented social work practice towards managing and securing against risk as opposed to genuine attempts to respond meaningfully to need” (Stanford, 2009, p.1065).

Advanced liberalism and its relationship with risk has shifted the nature of social work (Garrett, 2011). In work with families, risk rhetoric has led to the emergence of child protection rather than family support, while criminal justice social work has witnessed a shift in its erstwhile purpose to advise, assist, befriend and rehabilitate the individual offender towards a predominant focus on community safety. This in turn has fueled a “renewed and retrogressive faith in incarceration and, more broadly, what has been termed the ‘new punitiveness’” (Garrett, 2011, p. 340). It is evident, too, in the wider corrections and surveillance agendas, which have by the nature of such developments led to an inevitable growth in involuntary clients (McNeill, 2018).

On the ground, these changes are evident in what Holman (1998, p. 124) identifies as “a different kind of social work, which (is) at once both mechanical and inspectorial” and in practice discourses emphasising compliance (Munro, 2011). Demands for compliance were formalised within the social work doxa that emerged over the course of the 1980s and 90s, fuelled by so called “what works?” programmes. Yet the consequences of attempts to enforce compliance are mutual suspicion, resistance and confrontation. Forrester *et al* note child protection social workers’ “high level of confrontation and a relatively low level of listening in their work with parents” (2008, p.1315). Linguistically, this type of practice is reinforced in the insinuation of terms such as “perpetrator” or “batterer” into everyday social work talk.

Harvey (2007) notes the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism; while on the one hand seeking to free up markets and provide a participatory and/or consumer focus, it is, on the other, bureaucratic and socially authoritarian. While increasingly promoting discourses of client participation, states simultaneously construct systems which position social work within a compulsion paradigm. While advocating user involvement, they act against its meaningful realisation by eroding the social work relationship in favour of bureaucratic systems. They talk simultaneously of empowerment and risk and of the need to reduce the prison population while (in Scotland) locking up ever greater numbers (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2019).

Attempts at a policy level to square the circle are rarely helpful. The Scottish Executive (2006) notes that personalized approaches to practice can be difficult with involuntary clients but can be achieved, but it doesn't say how. When it does seek to elaborate, in guidance on child protection it resorts to platitudes "[s]ervice users should be listened to, respected and responded to" and that "[a]ccount should always be taken of diversity and equality issues ..." (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 25- 26). The mixed messages inherent in such statements, not surprisingly, create challenges in respect of balancing the rhetoric of partnership in practice with the realities of the lives of resistant clients (Ferguson, 2011).

A consequence of these simultaneous demands for engagement and compliance is that we risk maintaining or reawakening the spectre of social work past through reintroducing a deserving and undeserving divide; the deserving client being one of the minority, invariably more articulate grouping, able to demand their rights as consumers of a social work service, and the undeserving those for whom the social work role is one of policing – the offender, the drug user, the careworn parent; in fact, the most likely user of social work services.

Tactics of user involvement

I now go on to consider how social workers might negotiate some of the contradictions identified above. In general, the themes that emerged from the various strands of the knowledge exchange project chime with and reinforce what the existing literature on involuntary clients points to (Trotter, 2015; Munro, 2011). These might be grouped as:

- the importance of social workers' relationships with service users for enabling meaningful engagement;
- the value of clear communication, information and explanation;
- the potential for bureaucratic managerial structures to act as barriers to engagement.

Looking back on the project from the distance of a few years though, it is evident that there is something else going on when social workers engage with clients. Our findings resonated with Williams and Whittaker's more recent (2018) study, which highlights instances of very good but also very poor social work practice. This isn't just about employing instrumental skills but involves a more embodied conception of how social workers engage. This is "derivative from and irretrievably dependent upon ... everyday ways of being" (Smeeton and O'Connor, 2019, p. 16). This takes us beyond traditional social work knowledge sources to

include features of the social work relationship that are more value-based and dispositional and reflect how social workers “are” with clients. So, a starting point to legitimacy in working with involuntary clients might include basic qualities of being helpful being respectful and being human (Robinson and McNeill, 2008).

Such qualities might be encapsulated in Axel Honneth’s (1996) concept of recognition. This, as Turney (2012) has discussed, provides a suggestive value position for social work engagement. Recognition and its obverse, disrespect (Honneth, 2014), would seem to offer a framework from which to approach work with involuntary clients. It provides the foundation of positive relationships in terms of a basic moral demand for recognition of and being recognised by others. In the criminal justice field co-productive relationships based around an experience of recognition were deemed to be foundational in clients’ journeys towards desistance and recovery and an important means of discovering or recovering voice, worth, agency, responsibility and citizenship (McCulloch, 2016).

Our knowledge exchange project pointed to instances where social work practice did not recognise clients – and sometimes actively disrespected them:

I didn’t like it how everyone was round that table and it was like they were judging you . . . it was just such an intense thing having to sit there and just listen to, you know, what was round about you.

Another client felt that people “didn’t want to hear (him)” and “didn’t listen”. He didn’t always understand what was being spoken about in the room and felt that people just said what they wanted and spoke their minds without listening to him or what he wanted. The only positive aspects of his experience seemed to revolve around his relationship with a key worker, whom he valued because he explained and advocated for him.

A quality of trust emerged as a central component in relationships between clients and workers. Involuntary clients are often deeply mistrustful, as expressed by this client: “I can understand why a lot of people hide things from them and didnae [didn’t] tell them ’cos they are scared they’ll say ‘Right we are taking your bairns [children] offa you’”.

Workers recognised and had to overcome this (understandable) barrier to engaging

. . . initially she was very mistrustful of us . . . thinking ‘how do I know you are going to follow through on these things?’ You know, ‘I don’t feel I can be honest with you ’cos if I tell you the truth you are going to take my child away for ever

Trust and indeed, respect, could be evident in the small things of everyday practice: . . . “if you don’t phone when you say you are going to phone or something, then you will get a very angry response, “I trusted you” . . . “on a quite basic level”.

Recognition, as Honneth suggests also builds up over time

...over the years that have been working with her I think she sort of understands me a bit better than when she first saw me . . . of course it has been the same one over the six years . . . she has a bit mair (more) understanding than what she had at first .

And in some cases this could take longer than others and required a social worker to pick up and act on cues and on client expertise.

I have minor learning difficulties and I said that I will get there, you just need to give me time and work slowly with me ... be patient with me instead of saying to me you need to do this by a certain date. Ever since then me and my social worker got more closer and worked together... you’ve just got to do it in your own pace in your own time instead of social workers having timescales on everything.

It might also involve setting aside bureaucratic timescales as this example of a woman being told to separate from her partner who was deemed to be a risk to a child.

They just tell you, “you need to do it” and just expect you to do it and that’s not how it worked for me. I think if she just understood a wee bit – put herself in my shoes and thought ... because if you love someone it’s hard [to give them up] and you’ve just got to do it in your own pace, in your own time, instead of social workers having timescales on everything

There were instances where social workers, whether for reasons of personality, lack of confidence or because they had internalised managerial doxa portrayed a particular image, which spoke of compliance but also evinced negativity: [Our previous social worker] “didnae

know how to deal with positive things. She was all happy to jump on us when we done stuff wrong but when we done stuff right she never commented on it, she never said nothing”.

Although the context of current day social work practice can push workers down a path of compliance or can legitimise such behaviours, everyday tactics offer spaces for engagement that is rooted in more human responses. Recognition can emerge in actions such as acknowledging where things had gone wrong: “she’s actually apologised on behalf of the social work department, which I have never heard a social worker do in my life”.

Workers can and many still do operate an element of discretion employing everyday tactics to subvert or mitigate strategic injunction and to avoid disciplining power. As a worker in a follow-on knowledge exchange project put it:

It gets me thinking about ... (that) Orwellian kind of thing, and the image in *1984* where he’s got that little space where the camera doesn’t see him just behind the wall, and “I can be a bit freer here” (author et al 2017, p. 985)

Conclusion

This article has offered a retrospective on previous work with involuntary clients and a reflection on the field more generally. So where has this taken me? The starting point has to be that an appreciation of context is vital; involuntary clients do not just exist – they do so because political and professional ideologies, structures and practices construct them as such. The current political context places contradictory and, at one level, untenable demands upon social workers. On a more positive note, the contradictions of advanced liberalism leave enough spaces for them to operate effectively (or indeed ineffectively). This involves messy, contingent and embodied work: going with the flow, working from cues, adapting responses to changing circumstance and, foremost, building relationships. Such work with involuntary (or indeed any) clients is at root dispositional and value-based rather than technical. It might be thought of as an art more than it is a science; that is, it is relational, contingent and constantly ‘in the making’ (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2015). Honneth’s (1996) concept of (mutual) recognition would seem to provide a solid base for such work in demanding that we recognise the common humanity of the other, regardless of what label has been attached to them.

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